

Everything and Nothing: An Oral History Interview in St. Johns, Arizona

By: H. Rae Monk

Jake Romero stood, his soft oak dining room table the only thing separating us. A recording device was our only audience. Lapel mics stretched from the device to the collar of his brown t-shirt where they'd been clipped by my nervous hands, trying not to brush the skin of his throat. My first solo oral history participant tilted his head side to side, loosening his neck. It was hard to stay present. My chest rose and fell in a steady breath, the hot furnace air drying my lungs. Everything was in place. "Shall we get started?" I asked, turning on the recorder.

I'm a farmer's daughter so maybe it's understandable that when I think of growth my mind turns to corn stalks and alfalfa and newborn calves on firm Wyoming soil. Time there is measured in reference to harvest seasons and growth cycles. Wyoming is space. The space between plow rows, the distance of barbed wire fence around properties prone to holes that need to be fixed and the space wind has to brush snow across roadways and driveways and always coming in sideways. The world rotates and all at once everything is green, and nothing feels like it's going to change.

Yet everything and nothing changes in rural spaces. The people age, the crops cycle, the buildings continue to stand, fearful of change, and families grow. However, the air still smells of sugar beets and corrals and sandstone. Beat-up four door trucks hold resilient neighbors, full of the sturdiness and surety of sweet sagebrush. The red brick of the mainstreet facade still glows, warm with the Wyoming sun. I'm me, because of those unchanging streets, and the values of those who roam them. I spent my childhood sure I'd never leave Wyoming, and my teenage years, sure I had to leave. My adulthood has been spent trying to reconcile the fact that no matter where I was, I was everything because of Wyoming.

"What a small world," I said.

The room on the Polytechnic campus of Arizona State University was new to me. The campus had a wilder landscape, but a calmer atmosphere than the Tempe campus from my previous undergraduate semesters. I was the singular person to show up to the informational meeting about a new master's program. In front of me, Dr. Vanessa Fonseca-Chávez sat, small against her chair. Her voice was much bigger than her person, full of cadences in a lower register. We'd been talking casually for ten minutes or so, when we decided no one else was coming.

She was measured, and spoke the way I wished my handwriting would look, every letter of every word hitting the line on the paper for an even read and an even listen. However, my penmanship like my vocal tics were anything but measured. When excited or nervous my words tumbled from my mouth like a child's lettered blocks, my brain always working faster than my tongue, but still unable to keep up as the words clomped into existence. My voice seemed to be forever in a run-on sentence, something also prevalent in my writing. Mindfulness and breath work taught me to reign in my tendency to over explain and gave my words space as sentences left me.

My nerves were getting to me in the intimate meeting. I tried to relax.

Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth.

I continued, "I mean not a lot of people even realize that Wyoming exists let alone have lived there."

"No I totally understand, it's different, but I truly loved Laramie," she said.

"Oh that's great!" my voice trilled through a toothy grin, omitting my distaste for the college town. The more I seemed to fight against my rural roots the more they kept creeping into my daily adult life.

"I primarily focus on Chicano narratives," she continued. "I'm interested in migration patterns of Hispanic populations, and border crossing narratives from New Mexico to places like Wyoming and Arizona. I've been focusing on sheepherding migrations especially and trying to get the oral histories of these folks recorded. There is a Spanish word, *querencia*, an idea of love or attachment to a place, that I'm exploring within these narratives."

She'd hooked me. When first starting college my dream was to be an anthropologist. It was during that early study my interest became focused on oral accounts. The subject of my associates degree capstone was the oral traditions of aboriginal Australians. This interest ended up being buried over and over again over the intervening years. However, the interest kept cropping up into my changing studies, first in international relations, and then ultimately in creative writing. Vanessa represented someone who could help propel me into a creative realm that reincorporated my love of learning about other cultures and the oral tradition theme that shadowed my academic moves.

Being from Wyoming made me think that I'd be fighting the disadvantage of not having more urban opportunities for my entire life. It was frankly infuriating and bewildering to realize that it was my rural upbringing that was helping me make connections with people who could get me

where I needed to be. My childhood came up insidiously in my writing during undergrad and little did I know that it would continue to help me connect with people in a genuine way. It was as if the whispering of corn stalks brushing against each other in springtime could call me back home, or maybe they were just trying to remind me of roots.

I'd seen my mentor, Vanessa conduct interviews earlier that same day. She always started by chatting with the participant, trying to get them comfortable. "Your house is beautiful." A compliment was always followed by a question, "Who's this in the picture?" There was always a picture. She took charge, but knew when the mic went on where to shine the spotlight. But she was down the hall interviewing Jake's wife, so it was up to me to help him shine and do justice to my hands-on training.

With the recording equipment rolling, my throat swelled with nerves as my brain and voice tried to work together to emote the relaxed feeling Vanessa brought to interviews.

"My name is Heather Rae Monk, we're here in St. Johns and I'll be interviewing. Do I have your consent to record?" It was more formal than intended, but we were rolling.

"Yes," he answered.

Simple and to the point.

We settled in.

Vanessa didn't teach any of my classes until the second semester of the program she'd convinced me to join. I talk a lot and talk fast. Vanessa can talk faster, and always makes herself clear, something I'm still trying to develop. After the first lesson, my head hurt from all of the information she distributed. It took days to process everything she'd given the class. She challenged me. Her favorite phrase, "Okay, let's flesh that out," was accompanied by her movement around her office, selecting book after book from her ceiling to floor office bookshelves, tucking her dark hair behind her ears and adjusting her glasses, never ceasing the flow of instruction. That was Vanessa. She had a way of making me feel like all of my ideas were good, but knew how to push me toward improvement without breaking my spirit. I always left her office feeling more confident, and validated.

Determined to use the confidence Vanessa had built in me, Jake and I continued the interview.

“Have you always lived here?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was born in Springerville, Arizona. September the eighteenth, about four o’clock in the morning, I think it was a Sunday. Back in ‘49.” I smiled at his answer. It was so like the beginning of a legend. I’d watched great storytellers all my life, old-timers standing around fenced animals, in doorways of houses or sitting with food at the dining room table. In Wyoming, my home state, there was always room at the table, and an extra burger or egg to fry for unexpected guests. I saw that same kind of hospitality here. I had an idea where Jake might’ve learned that same kind of hospitality from.

I chuckled at my train of thought and asked the obvious interview question, “What was your mom’s name?”

The corner’s of his mouth lifted tenderly, “Corina.”

“And your dad?”

“Henry, Henry B. Romero. ‘B’ for Barreras.”

Another memory filled the space between us. I loved middle names and had gone by mine for years. The tradition of giving children their mother’s maiden name, for a middle name, was another thing that called back to Wyoming. Being in St. Johns kept doing that.

The whole scenario seemed impossible only a few days before when we had zero people to talk to, but we had months of research completed on the Hispano population of the area. This trip was a continuation of a grant-funded research project that Vanessa had offered to do with me that second semester. Jake was the first person in the door at our informational meeting, which was held in Jake’s sister-in-law’s home, where Vanessa and I crashed for the weekend of our trip.

Only strangers come through the front door. It was a common rule in Wyoming and added to my list of similarities to St. Johns. Sitting at the kitchen table, just inside that backdoor is where we met. Jake sauntered in, a grin attached to an extended hand pushed toward me, “Hi, I’m Stephanie,” he said with mischievous eyes, his body slightly bent. Flexing the muscle, a little out of use, from talking to my grandfather, I parried.

“Hi Stephanie,” and without letting any time hang, continued, “I’m Henry!”

His eyes widened and his grin spread so that his nearly un-wrinkled face folded slightly at the cheeks and ends of his eyelids. He chuckled and gave me a look of appreciation. Vanessa held out her hands and introduced herself in Spanish, they both laughed, the connection for a moment broken. He put his hand on her shoulder, as he shook the other, continuing to talk as others followed him into the house. Shortly after the initial greeting we gathered nearly twenty people in the sitting room. Our project was laid before them. We wanted to document their histories and the histories of their families in the region. They came prepared to talk. They wanted to tell us the “true history” of the area as soon as we took a breath.

“Everyone wants to say that Solomon Barth was the founder of St. Johns, but that’s just not true,” one of the guests said.

Everyone around the table nodded in agreement and started to talk with, over, and around each other.

The first people in the area were Hispano sheepherders. José Saavedra and the Candelaria family were mentioned right away. With these families the Catholic Church came. The first religion in the area, before the Mormons showed up. My attention focused as my childhood religion was mentioned. My dad had been reminding me in the weeks before we traveled to the St. Johns/Concho area that he had family members buried there. His family had been some of that first group of LDS who’d settled here generations back. Pushing my biases aside, my hands flashed across the notebook Vanessa had gifted me for the trip, to document their words.

The information I’d been reading between the lines in newspapers was being confirmed by the people whose families had lived through it all. They all claimed deep roots in the surrounding communities. When I’d hear their last names it was like a friendly wave, a look back through my research. Placing their parents and grandparents in my mental family tree of St. Johns was only half the battle. I wanted to know them and their stories from their perspectives. The names of the founders of the first settlement that was San Juan, later St. Johns, were represented right there in the room with us.

Jake’s voice brought me back to the moment. *Breathe in, breathe out*, my brain demanded. “So I was born there in Springerville and then, you know, here I am. From then on I’ve always been in St. Johns.”

“So you’ve never lived anywhere else?”

“Except for when I went to work in New Mexico after I graduated,” I made a note. Vanessa was especially interested in the migration of people back and forth to New Mexico.

“Is that the only time you lived away from St. Johns?”

“Went to Phoenix too, to school, you know, trade school up there, stuff like that.”

This migration back and forth reminded me of me. I’d left home for community college in-state, then moved back, like Jake had. Then I moved out of state to Oregon before coming back home yet again. Maybe these migrations were common to rural towns. Unlike Jake though I didn’t stay home, I’d moved to Arizona for school and hadn’t lived in Wyoming for nine years. Did I have more of a connection to Arizona than Wyoming? Jake’s connection to place had always brought him back to his hometown.

I loved doing the research of other families’ migrations, but hadn’t considered my own during our months of work. I heard somewhere that kids are boring, because everything they tell you, you already know. I wondered if Vanessa felt that way during our meetings when she’d indulge me, by letting me “reveal” my findings. They’d always seemed novel to me. She had a gracious, patient manner though.

“I found another Candelaria today!” I’d say.

“No, no I’m pretty sure they are one of the three Candelaria brothers that went to New Mexico and married the three Mirabal sisters,” she’d reply with a shuffling of papers.

“I thought that was the name of their dad?”

“It is, they have the same name.”

“Of course they do. Why would they make it easy on us?”

It made me feel like an investigator and it was always satisfying to make a connection. Vanessa with her earl grey and me with my coffee had sat in her sun bright office for countless lunches. When I look back on my two year degree, that room is where I’ll remember my happiest times.

Jake continued, “My mama lived right where that light is right now,” he told me as he pointed out of the window with his chin. “You know my-my dad died when I was twenty-four, and my

mama had eleven little kids at home still. So Gabie and I, since we got married, we've been helpin' her raise 'em, you know."

A sigh escaped me, "She sounds amazing."

"My mama *was* an amazing person."

"Mama" he called her. The consonant m's hard, the a's a soft "ah" sound. He became emotional, but didn't let tears fall. His work boot scuffed at the laminate floor and the palm of his hand rose and fell against the back of the chair in front of him.

"I get people all the time saying, yeah, your mom was the best cook in the world. She fed everybody that came through the door, you know, so there was always somebody there," he laughed.

His voice was fascinating. Jake had a lot of vocal tics. It was always "or whatever" or "you know?" He explains time is in three's. He laughs easily, he sighs often, and he gestures a lot. The gesturing must be a generational thing, because I'd seen my grandfather do the same. He'd point with either his chin, lips pushed out, or with his entire hand, no finger pointing. He often put his palm out facing down and measured from the ground up the leg to show you how tall something or someone was. He continued to stand.

Everything Jake said came back to family, religion, and St. Johns. He was the perfect person to interview. He embodied this idea of love or attachment to a place, Vanessa had called it *querencia*. No matter how much he went away or traveled he always came back and he cared deeply about his community and the land on which they lived.

"With your dad being a cowboy did you guys have, ah, animals growing up?" I asked.

"We had some cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, and goats, and stuff like that. Then we would trade back and forth, either here in town, or at Zuni Pueblo. Back then, all the old Indian men, they all knew Spanish. And most of them had Spanish last names. So, my dad would trade with 'em a lot." he answered.

Though the rhythm of our conversation had hit an easy tempo, Jake knew he was talking to an LDS raised girl. My biggest fear is that he couldn't be completely candid with me as an interviewer because of it. Over the course of that first get together and during the interviews we'd had earlier that day, we found out that the school system in St. Johns had been segregated

for a long time. As my mind tried to grapple with the right way to talk to him about this touchy subject, I was taken back to that first meeting.

I kept coming back to Jake the first night we met. My respect and fondness for him grew as we talked through the afternoon and into the evening. By the end of the night, our relationship was similar to the one my grandfather and I shared. My grandpa's teasing, something I hated as a kid and teenager, was serving me so well here, the smell of warm red brick and alfalfa seemed to be beckoning me back through the intervening years. Jake and I teased each other, told jokes, discussed family and religion in the home. Even sitting in an easy chair, he had an air of confidence and comfort. His cropped gray hair was almost military-style, his eyes were active and engaging, he smelled sweet, like sagebrush and his smile was like a cactus bloom.

"I don't know what I'd do without our Catholic church here," Jake said, his hand brushing through the air.

"Well the LDS say that they *settled* the area," someone said behind us.

"That's part of the problem, they think everything began when they got here and that's just not true," another voice chimed in, we turned to join the conversation, my pen at the ready to jot down notes.

"They always look down on us Catholics." Many heads nodded at that.

"There's always been problems there," Jake said.

"Mormons," someone said with a release of air at the end, making a "pah" sound. There were a few smirks and chuckles at that.

"Be careful, she's Mormon," a voice said, indicating me. My heart dropped. Quick to correct, hoping damage wasn't done in the confidence I was trying to build with the group, "Raised by Mormon's, but I'm not practicing."

Everyone in the circle looked uncomfortable at that. The subject changed quickly and the circle began to disperse going to the kitchen for a pot-luck item or gathering with another circle. I'd noticed Jake look at me, his gaze was hard to interpret. Disappointment? Fear? Shock?

"I'll try not to hold it against you," he said with his now familiar twinkle, and soft laugh.

My body relaxed and I smiled gratefully as we returned to talking about farming and animals and the similarities between our lives. My mission for the rest of the night was not to discredit my upbringing or my family's religion, but to show all the participants, especially Jake, that we were there for the Hispano-Catholic community. We were there to tell their stories, regardless of my background.

I needed to earn trust. When the night came to interview, it was a no-brainer that my rapport with Jake would mean we would be paired together.

My back popped as my hips adjusted in the wooden dining room chair, as my fingers moved the recording device, straightening it. Jake stayed standing with weight on one leg, touching the back of the chair in front of him. The time had come to put aside my discomfort and stop worrying that my questions would be offensive, *he won't answer if he's not comfortable*, the thought came, bolstering my nerve. With a big breath that stung my nose with the dry heated air of the home we continued.

"Did you go to elementary school when they were still separated?"

"Yeah. At the Coronado," he said, referring to the segregated elementary school.

"Then did you consolidate for high school?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure did."

"How was that?" I probed.

He took a few beats staring at me, silent. I tried to come at it a different way, "Did you like the consolidation? Or was it hard?" I asked

He laughed hollowly and sighed looking around the room as if he was searching for the best way to answer. "Things like this make you tough, you know? You don't necessarily hate anybody, you know, 'cause that's, not the way to grow up, but we fought. We fought before school, we fought through recess, we fought for lunch, we fought after school, and then we fought on Saturday's."

Jake stood shoulders rounded and drawn in, triceps pointing away from his body, chin down, eyes looking up at me through his eyelashes. I'd seen the stance before in boxing classes. Instinctively I wanted to raise my fists to my cheekbones and draw in my elbows, ready to parry a blow. A friendly spar was about to begin. More as a sign of friendship, than as a threat. Sparring is what keeps fighters sharp.

"There's a dividing line down here. You know, if we went over there, they'd catch us and do whatever. We'd do the same thing on our side too. It was just one of those things," he said with a shrug.

He continued.

"I was still leery of them when I came back from college in Phoenix and I told myself, you know what? I'm the one losing out. I really don't care how they think, and eventually got on the city council. Had to fight 'em all the way through. But, I always meet everybody, halfway, you know?"

"So, what's the best part about St. Johns?" I ventured.

"Everything."

"What's changed?"

"Nothing."

He said it without hesitation. There was an ache in my collarbone, as my thoughts turned to Wyoming. Could I say the same thing? What do I love about home? *Everything*. What's changed since I left? *Nothing*. Maybe *querencia* isn't about always feeling attached to a place. Maybe it's about always finding your way back to that attachment. Always finding your way home.